

# HISTORIC MAURY

*Featuring the people, places and events that make up the rich history of Maury County, Tennessee*

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*Historic Mount Lebanon Missionary Baptist Church*

*Celebrating 175 years in October 2018*

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## Historic Mount Lebanon Missionary Baptist Church

By Sandra Seaton

Editing and additional references provided by Colleen Farrell

This church history is drawn extensively from the research and narrative written by Sandra Seaton, three of whose ancestors were founding members of the church. In 1996 she personally took the early documents of Mount Lebanon to the Tennessee State Archives in Nashville for microfilming and preservation. It is thanks to her efforts that much of the church's history remains intact and available to researchers today.



Sandra Seaton

### BEFORE A CHURCH --- WORSHIPPING IN FEAR OF PUNISHMENT

With few exceptions<sup>1</sup> the plantation culture of the early 1800s in Maury County did not allow slaves to worship together openly. Groups of slaves, fearing punishment if discovered, worshipped and sang in the fields, out of sight of their masters. The white churches that permitted slaves to attend required them to sit in designated areas, separated from the white churchgoers.

Eventually a small group of African Americans began to attend church services at the First Baptist Church, established prior to 1840 in Columbia as a white church. They were allowed to worship only in the balcony, and, therefore, were not able to participate fully in the church services. Eventually the group decided to form their own church.

On October 20, 1843, Elisha Hanks, minister of the (white) First Baptist Church in Columbia, met with seven deeply religious African Americans to work out a way in which the seven could form their own Baptist church. These seven individuals became the founders of a new institution of historic significance, Mount Lebanon Missionary Baptist Church, the oldest National Baptist Church in Tennessee. Growing from humble beginnings as a group of slaves worshipping and singing in fields, hidden from their masters, Mount Lebanon became one of the acknowledged centers of leadership within the surrounding African American community in Columbia.

### SEVEN FOUNDING MEMBERS

The seven founders of Mount Lebanon Missionary Baptist included five free blacks and two men who had not yet gained their freedom.

- **Rev. Edmond Kelley<sup>2</sup>**
- **Rev. Richard Sanderson**
- **Dyer Johnson**
- **Reuben Polk**
- **Dempsey ("Demps") Cherry and Anna ("Annie") Cherry** [husband and wife]
- **Eliza Cherry Webster** [daughter of Dempsey and Anna Cherry]

<sup>1</sup> St. Paul AME Church (established in 1840) located at the corner of Second and Garden streets in Columbia, and St. John's Episcopal Church (consecrated in 1842) on the Mt. Pleasant Pike in Ashwood were two early churches in Maury County where African Americans were able to worship freely and participate fully.

<sup>2</sup> The spelling of "Edmond Kelley" in this narrative is taken from his autobiographical *A Family Redeemed from Bondage: Being Rev. Edmond Kelley, His Wife, and Four Children*, self-published, New Bedford, MA, 1851.

Although Edmond Kelley and Dyer Johnson remained legally enslaved at the time of Mount Lebanon's organization, they each had managed to achieve a freedom of movement and activity usually denied slaves. Their stories to freedom are each remarkable and worthy to be explored more fully in separate articles.

### AN INDEPENDENT AFRICAN AMERICAN CHURCH

Mount Lebanon was in existence nearly twenty years before the beginning of the Civil War. Few people realize that African Americans succeeded in organizing their own churches in the South before that conflict. The achievement of Mount Lebanon's founders and their successors in maintaining an independent African American institution in the South in the years before the Civil War, is powerful evidence of their collective intelligence, determination and character. Above all it is evidence of the strength of their faith. Present day Mount Lebanon Missionary Baptist Church continues to serve as a source of spiritual and social energy in the community.

### FIRST PASTOR OF THE NEW CHURCH

Edmond Kelley was born June 10, 1817 in Columbia, Tennessee to Kittie Burns, a slave, and Edmond Kelley, an Irishman born in Dublin, Ireland. Though he tried, Edmond's father was unable to raise enough money to purchase freedom for his wife and children. When Edmond was six years old, his mother was sold, but he and his sister Elizabeth remained the property of the White family in Columbia.

In his own words, Edmond Kelley wrote "*I experienced religion ... and was baptized the 14<sup>th</sup> day of May [1838]*"<sup>3</sup> Four years later, "*on the 19<sup>th</sup> of May, 1842, I was licensed to preach the gospel.*" Following is a form of the license:

*This is to certify that brother Edmond Kelley has been regularly authorized by the Baptist Church, Columbia, Tenn., to exhort and preach wherever he may have liberty to do so. This church also affectionately recommends him as a member whose conduct has always been exemplary and well ordered, and prays that his services among his colored brethren may prove acceptable, and by being blessed of the great Head of the Church, tend to the building up of our holy Zion. Done by order of the church, this 19<sup>th</sup> day of May, in the year of our Lord 1842. --- CHAS. A. FULLER, Clerk.*

Sixteen months later, on October 1, 1843, Edmond Kelley was ordained at the (white) First Baptist Church in Nashville by its leader, the noted pastor R. B. C. Howell, and Silas Webb. This was a highlight of Tennessee Baptist history— it marked the *first ordination of a black man, a slave, in the state's history*.<sup>4</sup> Nineteen days later, on October 20, 1843, the new church in Columbia was formed. Named First Baptist Church (colored), it later was called Mount Lebanon Baptist Church, then Mount Lebanon Missionary Baptist.<sup>5</sup>

The newly ordained Edmond Kelley was thought to have been the moving spirit in the organization of Mount Lebanon. He became the first pastor, serving from establishment in 1843 until 1845. He was, however, still enslaved to Nancy White, which was the reason he had to leave the pastorate of Mount Lebanon in 1845. At that time he became a missionary under the Concord Baptist Association. The White estate was going bankrupt, and his owner urged Edmond to leave the state of Tennessee to escape being sold to someone else. Nancy White authorized Kelley with a pass that enabled him to preach anywhere in the United States. With this pass, Edmond Kelley made his way northward, periodically checking in with

<sup>3</sup> Edmond Kelley, *Edmond Kelley, A Family Redeemed from Bondage: Being Rev. Edmond Kelley, His Wife, and Four Children*, self-published, 1851.

<sup>4</sup> Laska, Lewis, L., "Edmond Kelley, Tennessee's First African-American Ordained Baptist Minister," *Tennessee Baptist History*, Fall 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

Nancy White by mail. He went to Boston in 1847, a relocation that gave him de facto freedom. In 1848 he became the pastor of the Second Baptist Church of New Bedford, Massachusetts. While working there he began a fundraising effort to purchase his wife and children who were still in Columbia, Tennessee. This included newspaper circulars soliciting donations on behalf of his cause, seeking subscriptions. *"I stated*



*in my circulars for subscriptions, that I contemplated publishing all the facts relative to the purchase of my family, including the letters from various churches, provided they did not object to their being published."*<sup>6</sup>

Edmond Kelley led a full and productive life. In addition to purchasing his family out of slavery, he was Tennessee's first ordained African American Baptist minister, founded at least six churches, wrote numerous newspaper articles and pamphlets, traveled to Britain to speak against slavery, received permission from Abraham Lincoln to pass through Union lines to minister to his race, shook the hand of another President (Andrew Johnson), and worked to unify various black

Baptist groups into what later became the National Baptist Convention.<sup>7</sup>

## SECOND AND THIRD PASTORS

Rev. Richard (Pap) Sanderson, one of the seven founders, succeeded Rev. Kelley as pastor and remained in that position for 28 years (1845-1873). During this time, Rev. Sanderson organized and served as Moderator of the Duck River Association. He was born June 30, 1821 and, in his later years, lived in Columbia at 85 East Tenth Street.<sup>8</sup>

Rev. Baalim Frierson replaced Rev. Sanderson in 1873 and remained pastor for ten years until 1883. Under him the church split and began another church, some of whose members later started the Mount Calvary Baptist Church.

## A PLACE TO WORSHIP

The first church building was located at 1020 Maple Ash, a few blocks southeast of the current site of Mount Lebanon. The total purchase price for the lot was \$100, of which Dyer Johnson gave \$60. The deed describes the plot as being located "at the head of the Burns Spring."<sup>9</sup> This remained the place of worship until the new and larger church was built [1885] at its present location on the corner of East Eighth and Glade streets. During the Reconstruction Era, a school for freed slaves organized by local farmer and educator Cyrus Webster, husband of Eliza Cherry Webster, met in the church building. Threats from the Ku Klux Klan and "night riders" drove one of the teachers out of town, and nearly lynched Dyer Johnson, believing that he was the teacher.<sup>10</sup>

After the new building was constructed in 1885, the church sold Robert G. Johnson (son of Dyer Johnson) the original church site for \$200. Robert Johnson used timbers from the old church to build his house, which stood next to Dyer Johnson's home. The site has remained in possession of the Johnson family since that time.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Kelley, Rev. Edmond, *A Family Redeemed from Bondage*, published by the author, New Bedford, Massachusetts, 1851, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Laska, Lewis L., "Edmond Kelley, Tennessee's First African-American Ordained Baptist Minister,"

<sup>8</sup> *Century Review of Maury County 1905*, p.39.

<sup>9</sup> *Hither and Yon, Vol. 1, The Best of the Writings of Jill K. Garrett*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Maury County Historical Society, Columbia, TN, 199, p. 30.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> Ibid



### A NEW AND LARGER BUILDING

The current church building was erected in 1883-1884 during the pastorate of **Rev. John Smith Gilmore**. The leading carpenters were Jessie Sims and Washington Harrison, both members of the church. While working on the building Harrison was struck on the head by a hatchet that fell from the roof. The injuries he sustained led to his death. His funeral was held in the unfinished church, thus Washington Harrison was the first person to be funeralized in the present building.

The brickwork for the new church was laid by former slave and master bricklayer Isaiah Gholson (not a member of the congregation.) Gholson also laid the brickwork for several other churches in Columbia.



Completed in 1885 at the corner of E. Eighth and Glade streets, this building has been in use for over 130 years. This view is from the northwest.

### FOURTH MINISTER OF MOUNT LEBANON

John Smith Gilmore was born in Pulaski, Tennessee in 1846. He served for the last two years of the Civil War then attended the Baptist College in Nashville (later renamed Roger Williams University). Rev. Gilmore, who began preaching in 1871, organized and built five different churches during his career. When he became pastor at Mount Lebanon in 1883, he was already moderator of the Richland Creek Association. He led Mount Lebanon into that association, leaving the Duck River Association that was previously organized by Rev. Richard Sanderson. In 1894 Rev. Gilmore left Mount Lebanon because of "a difference of opinion." He accepted the parsonage building as settlement for money owed to him by the church. After he left, Mount Lebanon rejoined the Duck River Association.

### 1866-1901: A PERIOD OF CONSTRUCTION AND TURMOIL

From the time Mount Lebanon was organized in 1843 until 1865, the church had only two pastors, the Rev. Edmund Kelley followed by Rev. Richard Sanderson. Then came an era of construction and turmoil. This period in the church's history resulted in three splits of the church.

- **The first split** occurred under the leadership of Rev. John S. Gilmore, one of the builders of the present church building. After a dispute Rev. Gilmore left and organized St. John Baptist Church on the southeast corner of E. Eighth and Glade streets across the street from Mt. Lebanon.
- **The second split** came in the 1880s when Rev. Baalim Frierson left to organize the First Missionary Baptist Church, located in the 100 block of East Eighth Street.
- **The third and final split** took place in 1900. After Rev. Nicholson returned from a conference and decided to split with the church, he organized the East Eighth Street Church of God.

#### SUMMARY OF 19<sup>th</sup> CENTURY PASTORS

- |  |                             |
|--|-----------------------------|
| ◆ Rev. Edmond Kelley 1843-1845           | ◆ Rev. Peter Cross 1895     |
| ◆ Rev. Richard "Pap" Sanderson 1845-1873 | ◆ Rev. J.G. Blakeshire 1896 |
| ◆ Rev. Baalim Frierson 1873-1883         | ◆ Rev. A. Nixon 1897        |
| ◆ Rev. John Smith Gilmore 1883-1894      | ◆ Rev. Nicholson 1900       |

#### THE FACES OF MT. LEBANON CIRCA 1880

Throughout their lives women such as Annie Cherry (1789-\_\_\_\_) and her daughter Eliza Cherry Webster (1811-1885) were moving spirits in the progress of the church. Other church members of that period included Frank Wickfall, Milton Leftwich and Cyrus Webster (1812-1891), husband of Eliza.

Cyrus Webster was one of the early leaders of this African American community. Prior to coming to Maury County, he worked for the Webster



**Faces of Mount Lebanon Missionary Baptist circa 1880**

*Photo restoration provided by a grant received by Sandra Seaton from the Kellogg Foundation*

family of Kentucky not as a slave but as a free person, educated by the Websters. In 1830, at the age of 18, with a considerable sum of money for the years he worked for them, he left Kentucky and settled in Maury County. After initially purchasing land on the old Bear Creek Pike and farming there, Webster later moved to Columbia and purchased lots of property. Family stories tell of his desire to spread learning throughout his own community. Besides being one of the few African American farmers in Columbia prior to the Civil War, he was an educator. Because he had been taught to read and write at an early age, he felt this should be the right of every African American in his community. Early articles in the *Columbia Herald* document Cyrus Webster teaching at the school in the Mt. Lebanon church building.



**More of the faces of Mount Lebanon Missionary Baptist circa 1880**

The completion of the new church building in 1885 came about by the inspiration and zealousness of this dedicated group. Among the other early members of the congregation were John Brown, a well-known barber who owned a shop on N. Main Street next to the Nelson House Hotel, and his wife Caroline. For many years Brown was the leading barber in Columbia. A free man of color, he accompanied a group of 25 local citizens to Washington D.C. for the inauguration of President James K. Polk. John Brown died in 1898 at age 87 and is buried in Rosemount Cemetery along with his wife, who was a member of Mt. Lebanon Baptist from 1846 until her death in 1876.

## 1901-1963: A PERIOD OF CHANGE

During this time period, the church underwent a number of leadership changes. The following 22 pastors served from 1901-1963. They are the Reverends:

- |                      |                       |                         |
|----------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| ♦ S.H. Johnson 1901  | ♦ L.A. McEwen 1919    | ♦ M.F. Riley 1942       |
| ♦ C.A. Ward 1902     | ♦ B.L. Campbell 1920  | ♦ Raymond White 1945    |
| ♦ J.B. Spratlin 1905 | ♦ J.W. Lee 1921       | ♦ R.L. Lillard 1947     |
| ♦ B.J. Ivory 1911    | ♦ B.L. Brocks 1926    | ♦ D.L. Dunlap 1948      |
| ♦ W.T. Green 1914    | ♦ D.M. Ealey 1930     | ♦ James S. Harris 1950  |
| ♦ J.W. Robinson 1916 | ♦ L.R.W. Johnson 1934 | ♦ J.R. Bridgewater 1956 |
| ♦ W.C. Kelly 1917    | ♦ I.T. Mack 1936      |                         |
| ♦ L.R. Womack 1918   | ♦ S.M. Weaver 1939    |                         |

In 1954 the church acquired a parsonage, a five-room frame house. Nine years later the parsonage was remodeled into a seven-room house with walls of white stucco. Storm doors were added, and a garage was built. Under Rev. J.R. Bridgewater the walls of the church sanctuary were reconstructed and other improvements made to the church building.



**Rev. David E. Williams, Sr.**  
Sept. 15, 1932 – Nov. 2, 2016

## 1963-2015: A PERIOD OF RECONSTRUCTION AND ACQUISITION

Stability and longevity came to the pulpit with the arrival of Rev. David E. Williams, Sr., who was called to the pastorate of Mount Lebanon Missionary Baptist Church on July 30, 1963, preaching his first sermon the third Sunday in August of that year. Rev. Williams oversaw a complete renovation of both the interior and the exterior of the church structure. The outside was sandblasted. New classrooms, air-conditioning and heating units were added, and many other improvements made. Under the leadership of Rev. Williams, the church acquired and then erected facilities on several additional properties, including the G.A. Newbern/Eural Cofer Education Building, a Prayer Garden at the Old Gray Stone Hall, and the Melrose Grill. A 1¾ acre lot on W. Eighth Street was acquired with plans to build housing for the elderly. Land adjacent to the church was also acquired for a parking lot.

In 1993 the Education Building was remodeled to include the church office complex and study areas. In 1997 the David E. Williams/Bruch Barnett Prayer Garden was developed on the west side of the church campus for a place to contemplate, pray and feel the presence of God the Father.

In 1999 a commercial refrigerator; tile for the kitchen; furniture for office spaces, and new choir robes were purchased. That same year the church exterior was painted. In 2000, the church was able to purchase a van and acquire additional property on the south side of the church building.

## YEAR 2002: THE RAINS CAME DOWN

February 2002 brought tragedy which turned out to be a blessing. Heavy rainfall caused the church basement to flood with 4-5' of water and the Newbern/Cofer building flooded with 6-8" of water. Major restoration was needed on both buildings. Stud walls in the church basement were replaced with eight-inch blocks; partitions for classrooms were built; the basement ceiling was replaced; and a handicap restroom installed in the upper level of the church as well as other work undertaken to repair the damaged buildings.



It was most important to remove the six or seven wooden posts that had carried the weight of the building since 1885. These posts were replaced with six inch steel pipes.

In May 2003 a second flood caused damage. The congregation again faithfully made repairs and refurbished the buildings.



Mount Lebanon was one of the few churches asked to participate in the Majestic Middle Tennessee Fall Tour of Historical Churches. Additionally, a Tennessee Historical Commission marker was placed at the church in recognition of the history of the church and the site.

Rev. Williams led Mount Lebanon for fifty-two years retiring from the pulpit in November 2014. The many improvements during his pastorate, evidence of his effective leadership, demonstrated the generosity and loyalty of the members of Mount Lebanon during the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Rev. David Williams sought to link the church's spiritual home and its worldly home. His strong desire to revitalize Columbia's African American business community, his knowledge of past

social and cultural events and his hopes for future successes left a significant mark on his beloved community. His warmth, keen intellect, scholarly bearing and ability to relate to others were hallmarks of this great leader. Rev. Williams passed to his heavenly home on November 2, 2016.

## REV. GREGORY C. GIVENS



Rev. Gregory C. Givens

In 2015 Rev. Gregory C. Givens was called to serve at Mt. Lebanon. Along with his wife Lady Seka Givens and their daughters, he has become an integral part of the Columbia community of faith. Rev. Givens holds the work of his predecessor Rev. David E. Williams, Sr. in the highest regard. Out of respect for Rev. Williams, the order of service and aspects of church management were kept as close as possible to those established under Rev. Williams.

Rev. Givens brings a wealth of diverse experiences to the church community. His youth, intellectual vigor and plans for the church's growth are important assets. In addition to the ongoing care of the church properties, under Rev. Givens Mt. Lebanon continues to advance in leadership ministries. Rev. William Johnson (Dyer Johnson's great-grandson), Rev. Joseph Brown, Sr., Minister Eugene Whitaker, Minister Felix Payne, Rev. Terrence Blakesley, Minister Samuel Jordan, Minister Ruby Johnson, Minister Constance Crawford, Minister David E. Williams, Jr., and Minister Grady Riddle have all served as Associate Ministers of the church.

In order to continue service to its congregation and the greater Columbia community, Mt. Lebanon Missionary Baptist faces a number of ongoing challenges related to the age of the church. Foundation repairs were made in 2018; work on the walls is still needed. Funds are needed to restore the planks on the floor of the upper level of the church. As suggested by Rhonda Warfield Burkeen, Chair of the Anniversary Committee, Rev. Givens hopes to be able to have the church bell rung on the 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the church on October 21, 2018 if the planks will allow a bell ringer to crawl into the upper space safely.

Striving to stay abreast of the church's needs, Rev. Givens made the following updates. In 2016 a new microphone system was installed. In 2017 new light fixtures were purchased for the sanctuary. Rev. Givens began the renewal of the prayer garden in December 2017 and finished the work in 2018, assisted by Sister Stella Barnett, Clementine Moore and William Moore, with the placement of a cross on the area.

Under the leadership of Rev. Gregory C. Givens, the restoration needs of Mt. Lebanon will continue to be met with a fierce devotion and a hope that a path will emerge to facilitate the ongoing repair and preservation of the 133-year old building.

Through the deep-seated faith of Rev. Givens, the church leadership and congregation, Mt. Lebanon remains the *oldest National Baptist Church in Tennessee*, a major landmark in the history of Baptists in Tennessee. The church maintains its vitality while continuing to serve as a source of spiritual and social energy in the Columbia community.

### ***Additional References:***

This history of Mount Lebanon Missionary Baptist Church in Columbia, Tennessee is based on documents stored in the Tennessee State Archives and in several other published documents.

- Many of the facts mentioned are derived from a history of the church printed and distributed by Mount Lebanon itself under Rev. David E. Williams.
- 1996 interviews with Rev. Williams by Sandra Seaton
- Additional details are based on an anonymous handwritten three page note composed by a church member in 1970. The church records were kept by church officials with various titles such as clerk, secretary, deacon or deaconess; probably one such official wrote the three page history.
- A second undated anonymous, handwritten note, again by a church member,
- The "Autobiography" of Prof. J. H. Kelly, as printed in *The Life and Work of Prof. J. H. Kelly* compiled by Beatrice E. Gordon,
- A two-page note by Mrs. Eddie M. Johnson Jones, descendant of Dyer Johnson.
- An undated, typed historical document produced by the church subtitled "The Oldest National Baptist Church in Tennessee."
- Wade Hall's *The Rest of the Dream: The Black Odyssey of Lyman Johnson* (University Press of Kentucky, 1988), the oral autobiography of Lyman Tefft Johnson.
- ◆ Firsthand knowledge of Sandra Seaton, a direct descendant of three of the founders of Mt. Lebanon.
- ◆ Rhonda Warfield Burkeen, Chair of the 175<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Committee.
- ◆ Rev. Gregory C. Givens, Senior Pastor.

The facts presented in this history are accurate, but, as with any historical inquiry, it remains possible that further research will uncover additional information or reveal errors.



Rev. Gregory Givens and Lady Seka Givens with their daughters



1885 church building on southwest corner of E. 8<sup>th</sup> and Glade streets

## Celebrating 175 Years October 21, 2018

Many descendants of the original seven founders of Mount Lebanon Missionary Baptist Church remained active in the congregation and in the community during the past 175 years.

Below are a few of the names and faces who are descendants of the founders.

### CONTEMPORARY DESCENDANTS OF THE FOUNDERS



From left: Rev. David Williams, Camille Howell, Renai Meredith, La Tanya Douet, Kenneth Kelly, Sandra Seaton, James Seaton, Wayne Kelly, Aurelia Spraggs, Ruby Johnson and Michael John Kelly

Photo 10/22/2006

### 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY DESCENDANTS OF THE FOUNDERS



**John Henry Kelly**  
*Son of Edmond Kelley*

Born and educated in Boston, he visited relatives in Columbia after the Civil War. Seeing the great need for education among African Americans, he changed career path from lawyer to educator. He became the first Principal of College Hill School, and worked 39 years in education in Tennessee.



**Prof. Robert G. Johnson**  
*Son of Dyer Johnson*

Robert graduated from Roger Williams University in 1885, and became a longtime teacher in the colored school in Columbia. He actively worked to have a high school department and additional curriculum added, and became Principal of the high school. Robert bought Mt. Lebanon's first church building after the new church was completed in 1885, and used timbers from it to build his own house.



**Lyman Tefft Johnson**  
*Grandson of Dyer Johnson*

He was an educator, reformer, civil rights activist, and influential role model for racial desegregation. He was the plaintiff whose successful legal challenge opened the University of Kentucky to African American students in 1949. Lyman T. Johnson Hall at the university is named in his honor.



**John B. Webster & Emma Hatcher**  
*Son of Eliza Cherry & Cyrus Webster*

John served 17 months as a private with Co. F. 24<sup>th</sup> Reg. U.S. Infantry during the Indian War. Upon return home, he was employed as head cook at Columbia Military Academy.

Emma Webster was the daughter of John Hatcher of Blythewood and Lizzie Bradshaw. Emma was a caterer.